TRANSLATIONAL INDETERMINACY AND MEANING FACTS

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1. Introduction

One of the many tasks that Quine's famous thesis of the indeterminacy of translation seems to fulfill is to, once and for all, do away with such intentional objects as propositions or what may also be referred to as meaning facts. Let us try to elaborate this by pointing out the various reasons which prompt philosophers to admit propositions over and above written and spoken sentences. There are three main demands that the notion of proposition is introduced to meet. Firstly, we require a noun to stand for that which two people who believe the same thing both believe, two people who doubt the same thing both doubt and the like. The claim is that the best way of explaining what is involved in the case when we say that two people share a belief is that there is some single object - a proposition - which is what they both believe. Secondly, a proposition is taken to be that which two declarative sentences, either of the same language or of different languages saying the same thing, both say. The respect in which two sentences are the same is what is commonly known as meaning, and therefore, propositions are taken to be meanings of declarative sentences. Furthermore, philosophers introduce propositions to give an account of the truth and falsity of an uttered or written sentence. It is only regarding a sentence which has been uttered and/ or written (that is, a sentence conveying a particular thought) that we can sensibly ask whether the sentence is true or false.

In spite of these apparently reasonable grounds for admitting propositions, hostility towards this notion among philosophers is not uncommon. This hostility might take various shapes. Some may say that

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since propositions are abstract entities, an empiricist ought to understand and paraphrase such talks in terms of some more concrete notions. According to another form of the objection, we can permit talk of propositions but should keep in mind that they are of no value in clarifying any problem in the theory of meaning, the value of such talks might only be pragmatic. The last and the most radical approach is that we cannot permit talk about propositions at all, even as analysing and paraphrasing in some other terms, because the notion itself is infirm.[1]

Quine's reasons for dispensing with propositions are of the third and most radical kind. In the very beginning of *Philosophy of Logic* he writes,

> My objection to propositions does not arise primarily from philosophical parsimony - from a desire to dream of no more thing in heaven and earth than need be. Nor does it arise more specifically, from particularism - from a disapproval of intangible or abstract entities. My objection is more urgent.[2]

Again in *Word and Object* he says,

> The very question of the conditions for identity of propositions presents not so much an unsolved problem as a mistaken ideal[3]

It should be noted, at this point, that the way Quine approaches this problem in *Philosophy of Logic* is different from the way in which he approaches it in *Word and Object.* The 'urgent' objection that he puts forward against the notion of proposition in the former is that if we are to admit propositions, we have to admit them as determinate equivalence classes of sentences where the equivalence relation is the relation of synonymy. But Quine thinks that this equivalence relation does not make any sense.

In this paper we will concentrate on Quine's objection to propositions from the arguments from the indeterminacy of translation - arguments that are found in his book *Word and Object* (1960) and later on in the article 'On the Reasons for Indeterminacy of Translation' (1970b). Our main tasks will be to show that Quine's arguments from the indeterminacy thesis do not work against the notion of proposition. Here one might say that even if we

succeed in showing this , Quine seems to have a separate argument against the notion of proposition - the argument which can be found in *Philosophy of Logic*. Does Quine really have such an argument, independent of the one based on the indeterminacy thesis? It does not seem so. Once we closely scrutinise the two arguments, we will come to realise that the one found in *Philosophy of Logic* is a special version of the one that we get in *Word and Object.*

Quine's arguments against the notion of synonymy can be shown to be related to his arguments from the indeterminacy thesis. Once we admit indeterminacy of translation we will be able to show that the partitioning of sentences into determinate equivalence classes collapses, and therefore, the notion of a proposition makes no sense. Whereas, in *Word and Object* Quine's argument is roughly that if we can establish the indeterminacy thesis, then we have to reject any objective fact about meaning and thereby reject the notion of proposition altogether. The Quinean arguments may be schematised in the following way :

1. Indeterminacy of translation -> No determinate equivalence classes of sentences -> No propositions

2. Indeterminacy of translation -> No facts about meaning -> No propositions.

Having schematised the two arguments thus, it can be shown that 1 is really a special version of 2. The reason why Quine says that equivalence classes of sentences does not make any sense is that the equivalence relation, the relation of synonymy, based on which the partitioning is made, makes no sense. To say that the relation of synonymy makes no objective sense can be interpretated as saying that there are no objective meaning facts. This point can be elaborated thus : In 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (1953) Quine raises doubts about the notion of synonymy. But one could argue that here Quine does no more than show that the notion of synonymy has not been satisfactorily explained, not that it can not be explained, and not that it makes no sense. Whereas if Quine's indeterminacy thesis is correct, then there are no meaning facts, and if there are no meaning facts there is no

synonymy, as acceptance of the relation of synonymy implies the acceptance of meaning facts. So, the indeterminacy thesis, by rejecting meaning fact, hence propositions, provides an important argument against synonymy. The main aim of the paper is to state Quine's doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation, the two arguments - the argument from above and the argument from below - trying to establish the indeterminacy thesis, the assumptions on which the arguments depend and how we may try to answer Quine.

2. *The Indeterminacy Thesis*

Before stating the thesis itself, we need to mention that what is fundamental to much of Quine's philosophy is the naturalistic behaviouristic conception of language, and his major doctrines develop within this framework of language. This notion of language is explicitly stated thus,

> Philosophically I am bound to Dewey by the naturalism that dominated this last three decades ... knowledge; mind and meaning are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science. There is no place for a *priori* philosophy.
>
> When a *naturalistic* philosopher addresses himself to the philosophy of mind he is apt to talk of language. Meanings are, first and foremost, meanings of language. Language is a social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people's overt behaviour under publicly recognisable circumstances. Meanings, therefore, those very models of mental entities, end up as grist for the *behaviourist's* mill.[4]

After having characterised language in this way, Quine goes on to say that meanings, which are primarily meanings of linguistic expressions, must be construed in terms of behaviour. But, Quine argues, if meaning is primarily a property of behaviour, then we have to admit that there are no meanings, not likenesses and distinctions in meanings, beyond what are implicit in people's dispositions to overt behaviour. What, according to Quine, results when we turn towards a naturalistic view of language and a behavioural view of meaning is that we give up the assurance of determinacy. The question whether the two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate

answer except insofar as the answer is settled by people's speech disposition.

Having noted this we can start our discussion of Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation. Suppose a translator, for convenience take her to be an English speaker, is attempting understand an unknown language, with no link to the language he is familiar with. To study how semantic facts are manifested in behaviour without any risk of relying upon information which already requires a semantic interpretation of the alien language, the translator.

(a) cannot appeal to dictionaries or existing partial translation manuals,

(b) cannot appeal to a partial translation into a third language for which translation into English already exists, and,

(c) cannot indulge in a historical study tracing common origins of English and the language to be translated.

Quine discusses this special case of 'radical translation', translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people.[5] This is a fundamental case - a case where, by abstracting from institutional frameworks involving both the linguist and the informant, we are free to focus exclusively upon the relation between physical facts and verbal behaviour. If this is the case then Quine thinks.

> Manuals of translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another.[6]

The above statement brings out the essence of Quine's indeterminacy thesis. A translation manual can be taken to be a function which maps expressions of one language onto the expressions of another language. Concerning the variety of translational manuals available, we usually regard one to be better than the others, because we believe that it gets right what is said in the language under translation, and we also believe that there is such a thing as the correct translation of a language, etc. Quine's thesis questions all these claims. According to him, between any two languages there are likely to be many translation manuals, all of which are adequate[7], yet which offer radically different translations of many sentences of that language.

To understand the arguments put forward by Quine for his indeterminacy thesis, it is essential to be clear about some of Quine's general concerns. These may be clarified by pointing out what Quine is *not* concerned with.[8] In the first place, Quine in this thesis, is not offering a description of the actual experience and the process of translation. He is aware that, as a matter of fact, translators do not encounter a huge number of manuals of translation which are incompatible with one another.

Neither is he suggesting that translation is much harder (or easier) than we usually suppose it to be. He is not denying the fact that most of the time we come across a translation manual which is obviously the best and reasonably take other translators to agree with it. Nor is he making the obvious claim that the differences in nuances and tones make it impossible for any translation to be adequate. As Hookway points out, "The problem runs deeper than that and concerns how we are to describe what occurs in translation.[9] It is usually taken to be the case that it is an objective factual matter whether or not the meaning of an alien utterance is the same as the meaning of utterance of an English sentence, and therefore, in the case of translating an alien utterancewe come to discover this objective fact and thus translate the alien utterance accordingly so that it conforms to the objective fact of the matter. Quine challenges this assumption itself. The translator does not discover any fact of the matter about whether an alien utterance is synonymous to some utterance in English simply because there is no fact of the matter to be discovered.[10]

3. *Background to the Arguments for the Indeterminacy Thesis*

There are two arguments advanced to establish the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation. They are, *the argument from above* based on the under determination of physical theory by observation and the *argument from below* based on Quine's famous 'gavagai' example or inscrutability of reference. Quine clearly distinguishes these two elements in his thought about the indeterminacy of translation in the following way,[11]

> There are two ways of pressing the doctrine of indeterminacy of translation to maximise its scope. At the upper and there is the

> argument, early in the present paper[12], which is meant to persuade anyone to recognise the indeterminacy of translation of such portions of natural science as he is willing to regard as underdetermined by all possible observation. If I can get people to see this empirical slack as affecting not just highly theoretical physics but fairly commonsense talk of bodies, then I can get them to concede indeterminacy of translation of fairly common-sense talk of bodies. This I call pressing from above.
>
> By pressing from below I mean whatever arguments for indeterminacy of traslation can be based on inscrutability of terms.

So it seems that the fact about 'gavagai' and the fact about the empirically undetermined character of physical theory are two separate issues. Though it should be pointed out here that some philosophers, like Blackburn (1975), think that the argument from below is needed merely to bolster up the argument from above and therefore should not be treated separately. It does not seem, reading Quine, he himself takes the relation to be so. We will follow him and try to develop the arguments separately.

Both the argument from above and the argument from below start from the same considerations. Quine takes the example of a radical translator where the language which is being translated into English is completely without any pre-existing aids to translation. The two considerations from which both the arguments start are, according to Quine, as follows.

> As always in radical translation, the starting point is the equating of observation sentences of the two languages by an inductive equating of stimulus meanings. In order afterwards to construe the foreigner's theoretical sentences we have to project analytical hypotheses, whose ultimate justification is substantially just that the implied observation sentences match up.[13]

So the first step in radical translation consists of translating a significant class of observation sentences. This is done by making inductively checkable guesses as to what the native's signs of assent and dissent are. In this way the radical translator correlates native utterances with sentences of his own

having the same stimulus meaning.[14] The second step consists in going beyond observation sentences and gaining access to the rest of the native language by adopting certain analytical hypotehses.[15] It will become clear, from a detailed discussion of the arguments, how they diverge after starting from the same considerations. So let us pass on to the main arguments.

4. The Argument from Above

Quine (1970b) remarks that philosophers wrongly take the 'gavagai' example as the ground for his doctrine of indeterminacy and hope, that by resolving the example, doubt can be cast on the doctrine itself. But the real ground is very different from the argument from above. It should be noted that we are not, contrary to what Quine's remark suggests, assuming that the argument from below has lesser value. It, in fact, seems to be a very important argument and will be discussed in full. The argument from above is based on the underdetermination of physical theory, the essential feature of which consists in the fact that a physical theory transcends all observational evidence, and hence, different competing physical theories can be developed from the same set of observational evidence. Quine argues for this in the following way :

> Naturally, it (i.e. the physical theory) is underdetermined by past evidence; a future observation can conflict with it. Naturally it is underdetermined by past and future evidence combined, since some observable event that conflicts with it can happen to go unobserved. Moreover, many people agree, far beyond all this, that physical theory is underdetermined by all possible observation... Theory can still vary though all possible observations be fixed. Physical theories can be at odds with each other and yet compatible with all possible data even in the broadest sense. In a word, they are logically incompatible and empirically equivalent.[17]

It should be noted that there is a basic difference between the third characterisation on the one hand, and the first two, on the other. In the first two characterisations Quine says that physical theories are, *in fact*, underdetermined - they are underdetermined by past observations because

future observations could conflict with them, or undetermine by past and future observations because some conflicting observation may go unnoticed.. Whereas in the third characterisation he makes a stronger claim that they are, in principle, underdetermined.

Having noted this underdetermined character of physical theory, suppose we set up to translate a foreigner's physical theory from scratch. We begin by pairing observation sentences of the foreign physicist with ours, on the basis of the identity of stimulus meaning, subject only to inductive uncertainty. In translating theoretical sentences of this foreign physicist we adopt some analytical hypothesis, the justification for which is that they deliver results consistent with all the evidence bearing on sameness of stimulus meaning of observation sentences we have already obtained. Quine thinks that it would now become clear what happens in radical translation of a radically foreign physicist's theory is the following,

> Insofar as the truth of a physical theory is underdetermined by observables the translation of the foreigner's physical theory is underdetermined by translations of his observation sentences. If our physical theory can vary though all possible observations be fixed, then our translation of his physical theory can vary though our translations of all possible observation reports on his part be fixed. Our translation of his observation sentences no more fixes our translation of his physical theory than our own possible observations fix our own physical theory.[18]

Gibson (1982) in his commentary on Quine points out that Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation is directed towards those who already accept the underdetermined character of physical theory. So we accept that a physical theory is underdetermined insofar as observation by itself is insufficient to fix, in any unique way, the theoretical sentences of a theory. Now when setting out to translate a physical theory, the linguist does so by translating the observation sentences of the theory, and this he does by equating stimulus meaning. To go beyond the observation sentences, he has to use the analytical hypotheses. However the same old empirical slack[19], as

Quine puts it, arises at this level as well. The analytical hypotheses are themselves underdetermined by all possible observation, and the linguist could have chosen a different set of analytical hypotheses compatible with the observational evidence.

This, however, is not the whole story, because Quine remarks,

> The indeterminacy of translation is not just an instance of the empirically underdetermined character of physics. The point is not just that linguistics, being a part of behavioural science and hence ultimately of physics, shares the empirically underdetermined character of physics. On the contrary, indeterminacy of translation is additional.[20]

Quine says that where we have two physical theories - A and B - compatible with all possible data, we may adopt A for ourselves and still remain free to translate the foreigner either as believing A or as believing B. Now our choice between A and B may be guided by simplicity. If both A and B involve complicated and cumbersome translation rules, then another possibility might be to refrain from ascribing to the foreigner either A or B, What would happen in this case is to ascribe to the foreigner a false physical theory which can be refuted, or some obscure physical theory, or hold that he has no physical theory at all. It might happen that A and B are equally attributable. In a situation of this kind, Quine says,

> The question whether,... the foreigner really believes A or believes rather B, is a question whose very significance I would put in doubt. This is what I am getting at in arguing for the indeterminacy of translation.[21]

Indeterminacy of translation, not just being an instance of the empirically underdetermined character of physics, should have properties which do not follow solely from the underdetermined character of physical theories, but from some other principles. The *additional principles* on which indeterminacy of translation is based is Quine's naturalism and his adherence to scientific realism. Though there is a parallel between translation and physical theory, at a certain point this parallel breaks down. Being a scientific realist, Quine believes that all facts are physical facts and all explanations are

physical explanations. Physical theory is the ultimate parameter, and despite its underdetermined character, the currently accepted physical theory serves as the last word regarding the truth of nature. In comparison no manual of translation enjoys the status of ultimate parameter. So while we can expect to settle questions like: are there electrons? in science, we can never expect to settle questions like 'what does 'gavagai' really refer to?' in linguistics. Indeterminacy of translation is its infactuality. But science is the paradigm of facts. As Gibson says,

> The former kind of question has a (physical) fact of the matter, by dint of physics being the court of last appeal; the latter kind of question has no (physical) fact of the matter because when all the (Physical) facts are in, the question (i.e, indeterminacy) remains unanswered. Translation, therefore, is indeterminate, for there is no fact of the matter for the translation to be right and wrong about.[22]

According to Quine correctness of a translational manual is not determined by facts, facts here being physical facts. His adherence to the thesis that physical facts are all the facts plays an extremely important role in his indeterminacy thesis, and we will come back to this point later on in the discussion.

5. *The Argument from Below*

In *Word and Object* Quine almost entirely concentrates on showing how indeterminacy can be derived from the argument from below involving the famous 'gavagai' example. In 'On the Reasons for Indeterminacy of Translation' he points out that the 'gavagai' example works as a direct example for inscrutibility of terms and not of indeterminacy of translation as such. But it does have a vey important, though indirect, bearing on the argument for the indeterminacy of translation. According to Quine the 'gavagai' example is aimed not at proof but at helping the reader to reconcile the indeterminacy of translation imaginatively with the concrete reality of radical translation.[23] By working as a concrete example of radical translation it helps in persuading us of the indeterminacy thesis. Let us see how it proceeds.

As has already been mentioned, the first step in trying to translate an

utterance of a wholly unknown foreign speaker into English consists of the linguists' observation of the agent speaking - that is, a close observation of the overt behaviour of the speaker in a particular context of linguistic utterance. Thus the most elementary step involved in translating the foreign language is the translation of the speaker's utterance associated with the present event that is conspicuous to the linguist and his subjects. The linguist experiences that whenever a rabbit scurries by, the foreign speaker utters 'gavagai'. So he notes down that 'rabbit' is the tentative translation of the utterance 'gavagai' in this unknown foreign language, but with the proviso that it is subject to future test.

The next step in the translation consists in testing whether the speaker assents to the utterance 'gavagai' when spoken by the linguist. This step is necessary for two reasons :

(a) There may be situations where the foreign subject could have said something, but in fact does not. It may very well happen that a rabbit runs by but the speaker does not uttter the sentence 'gavagai'. The only way to find a solution to this problem for the linguist is to utter the sentence under consideration himself and see whether the native speaker assents to it or dissents from it;

(b) Furthermore, the linguist must be able to discriminate among terms that overlap in their reference, and he can do so only if he has settled on the native expressions of assent and dissent. For example, the linguist would have to discriminate between foreign equivalence of 'rabbit' (which is 'gavagai') and the foreign equivalence of the term animal. So, on the basis of these observations the linguist makes a guess as to what is the assent and dissent behaviour of the native, and if any difficulty follows in his taking assent and dissent in the way he does, he may discard his first hypothesis and guess again.

Once the linguist decides on the native's expressions of assent and dissent, his next task is to equate observation sentences of the foreign language with observation sentences in English. This is done by learning to utter sounds in the foreign language sufficient to the task of querying a

native speaker for assent or dissent under various stimulus conditions. Working inductively the linguist is able to make approximate identification of stimulus meanings. It is true that the linguist cannot directly compare his own stimulus meaning for some sentence of English with his subject's stimulus meaning for some sentence in the particular foreign language, but the linguist can learn that his subject is prepared to assent to or dissent from the query 'gavagai?' in the same public conditions where the linguist himself would be prepared to assent to or dissent from the query 'rabbit?' So he concludes that the two stimulus meanings are approximately the same.

All these careful observations suggest that the stimulus meaning of the alien utterance 'gavagai' is the same as that of the English sentence 'rabbit' or there is a rabbit'. However many other English sentences may have the same stimulus meaning as 'there is a rabbit. We may list a few here:

(a) this is an undetached part of a rabbit.

(b) This is an instance of rabbithood.

(c) This is a stage in the history of a rabbit.

The point to be noted is that all these sentences, although derived from different translation manuals, are compatible with all the facts about stimulus meaning which hepls us in translating 'gavagai' as there is rabbit. The linguist may be reasonable enough to equate 'gavagai' with 'rabbit' but he will be mistaken if he thinks that the correlation of two observation sentences fixes the references of the term 'gavagai' uniquely. It may quite well be possible that instead of being a concrete general term, 'gavagai' is an abstract singular term referring to rabbithood, or even if it is a concrete general term, it may be one that is true not of rabbit but of undetached rabbit parts or rabbit stages. What this suggests is that meaning and reference are indeterminate on behavioural grounds and to enquire beyond the possible behavioural evidence for a unique meaning or a unique reference is a mistake. So, we give up determinacy of meaning and we recognise that there is no fact of the matter regarding unique translation. That is, there are no unique meanings or unique referents of native expressions beyond what can be

established on behavioural evidence.

It should be noted that Quine does not deny that a community of translators are more likely to have terms for rabbits rather than for parts of rabbits or, more unlikely, for stages in the history of rabbits. However, the supplementing arguments that may help us in narrowing down the choice among different candidate translations are really pragmatic considerations and is not, if Quine's argument is right, settled by the observable data.

Ostension, or pointing to the object concerned along with utterring of the name 'gavagai' is also ineffective in deciding the issue because it so happens that by pointing to a part of rabbit the linguist points to the rabbit as well. The questions that the linguist is concerned with at this stage are two-fold; Is the term 'gavagai' used to talk about an object at all, and if it is used to talk about an object, which object is it talking about? Quine believes that the facts about stimulus meaning do not give any determinate answers to either of these two questions. The only way for the linguist to start to settle these questions is by fixing the English equivalences of plural endings and pronouns, etc. of the language under study - only then can he asks questions like, is this gavagai the same as that one? Or is there one gavagai or two?' But while this method of translation is the best one could hope for, it is not sufficient for settling absolutely the indeterminacy involved in the case, because we can, by appropriately varying our analytical hypotheses about the translation of native's plurals, identity predicates, etc., accommodate whatever answers they supply to queries put to them. Therefore, it is possible to formulate alternative systems of analytical hypotheses all of which are compatible with the totality of speech dispositions of all concerned, and at the same time incompatible with one another. Quine admits that there is an obstacle to offering an actual example of two such rival systems of analytical hypoteheses. Known languages are known through unique systems of analytical hypotheses established in tradition or painfully arrived at by a unique skilled linguist. But he goes on to say

> ... one has to reflect on the nature of possible data and the methods to appreciate the indeterminacy. Sentences translatable outright,

> translatable by independent evidence of stimulatory occasions, are sparse and must woefully underdetermine the analytical hypotheses on which the translation of all further sentences depends. To project such hypotheses beyond the independently translatable sentences at all is in effect to input our sense of linguistic analogy unverifiably to the native mind... There can be no dount that rival systems of anaylytical hypotheses can fit the totality of speach behaviour to perfection, and can fit the totality of dispositions to speech behaviour as well, and still specify mutually incompatible translations of countless sentences insusceptible to independent control.[24]

The above discussion brings out that in the Quinean framework there can be no useful sense to question what 'gavagai' really means - there is no fact of the matter corresponding to the utterance.

6. *The Philosophical Implications of the Indeterminacy Thesis*

Hookway (1988) discusses what consequences about mind and meaning on the one hand, and reference and truth on the other, follow from the indeterminacy thesis.[25] Semantic notions which are intensional[26] - such as synonymy and analyticity - have no place in Quine's account of logic and philosophy of language. Furthermore our ordianry ways of describing and explaining mental events presuppose that they have propositional content, and we try to identify these propositional contents. There are two things on which we rely on in doing this. On the one hand, we observe the external behaviour of the agent and try to guess what beliefs and desires they have. On the other hand, we attend to their verbal behaviour and treat their utterances as manifestations of beliefs and desires. According to Quine, the behavioural evidence never fixes the contents of Propositional attitudes. The consequence of adhering to the indeterminacy thesis is that Quine rejects propositions, senses and attributes. So, for Quine, there is no point in asking questions like, do these two sentences express one proposition or two? Propositional contents, thus, being indeterminate, propositional attitudes have no place in the scientific study of mind and language.[27] The same arguments he puts forward against intensional notions like necessity and possibility.

Indeterminacy of translation casts doubt not only on intensional concepts, it affects the way in which we think about reference, truth and ontological commitment. The answer to the question, when the native utters gavagai what is he talking about? can be, according to Quine, rabbit, rabbit part, rabbit stage, rabbithood, etc. As it is possible to construct adequate translational manuals, between which no possible evidence could decide, there is no fact of the matter concerning which of them is correct. It should also be pointed out that, although it is meaningless, in a Quinean framework, whether a term like gavagai really refers, we can ask the question only relative to a translation manual. Therefore, statements about the ontological commitment of theories will always be relative to a particular manual of translation.

This is a problem which not only affects radical translation, it affects the understanding of one speaker by another speaker of the same language. In case where one English speaker is trying to understand another English speaker (that is, the case of homophonic translation), when someone says there is a rabbit, we take him to mean exactly that, by translating the speaker's utterance onto our own idiolect. It is true that homophonic translation has a role to play in domestic understanding to which nothing corresponds in radical translation the basic words and phrases of our mother tongue are learned by imitating our elders and it is here that homophonic translation becomes useful. But this special role is not to be explained by saying that, in the homophonic case, we uniquely capture the fact of the matter corresponding to what our fellow speakers say. So Quine's claim is much stronger than it appears. As Hookway says, reflection should make clear that Quine denies that even what I say has any determinate meaning for me : the ontological commitments of my own assertions are inscrutable to me. I can systematically reinterpret my own utterances and conclude that 'rabbit' in my mouth is true of rabbit parts and stages. The conclusion is that there is no fact of the matter about the ontological commitments of any sentences of theory.[28] So if Quine's indeterminacy thesis is correct, then there is no objective fact of the matter whether a sentence (this includes sentences involving perfectly ordinary terms and not just vague ones) is true or false, other than relative to a particular manual of translation.

7. *The Indeterminacy Thesis Evaluated*

This is, in brief, Quine's thesis for the indeterminacy of translation and the philosophical implications it has. By arguing for the indeterminacy thesis Quine questions the basic semantic concepts like, reference, meaning, propositions and rejects that our verbal behaviour can have any psychological explanation. As Hookway points out, it will be evident that it (the indeterminacy thesis) leaves intact very little of our familiar concept of mind and undermines most of the traditional aspirations of philosophy. We are left with an impoverished, highly naturalistic vocabulary for describing and explaining human practices, including the search for knowledge. [29]

Overwhelmed by this attack philosophers have tried to disprove it on various grounds. This has given rise to a huge literature, trying to show where Quine might have gone wrong. Our main concern, as has been mentioned in the introduction, is with the notion of propositions - that which two synonymous declarative sentences (either they be of the same language or of different languages) have in common, which is commonly known as meaning and which our translation tries to preserve. By casting doubt on determinate translation Quine casts doubt on a determinate meaning or a determinate meaning fact.

In order to see what are the debatable aspects of Quine's position, it may be worthwhile to start the discussion by considering some of the objections raised by Evans in his paper 'Identity and Predication' (1985). Evans starts by pointing out the difference between a translation manual and a theory of meaning. A translational manual is nothing but a mapping from expressions to expressions. So it tells us that.

'Snow is the English translation of the German Schnee'

The main purpose of providing a translation manual is to help us in arriving at, for each sentence of the language under study, a quoted sentence of another language having the same meaning. The translation manual has a limited capacity. It tells us which pairs of expressions have the same meaning, but not what their meaning is. For many philosophers a theory of meaning,

on the other hand, aspires to offer more than this. For them, it should explain the meanings of expressions by showing how they relate to the world. So, a theory of meaning, for each expression of the language under study, would provide a statement of what it means, a statement like the following.

'Schnee' in German means snow.

The most important difference between a theory of meaning and a translational manual is that the former is an explanatory theory (explaining how the meaning of a sentence depends upon the semantic properties of its parts) while the latter is not. Being explanatory in nature, 'it is hoped that the construction of a theory of this sort, which will do justice to the complexity of natural language, will provide revealing insights into the underlying logical structure of our language and into our ontlogical commitments.[30] The demand that a theory of meaning provides a good explanation of semantic competence will rule out those theories which entail that aliens are talking of rabbit stages or undetached rabbit parts.

According to Evans, Quine's arguments can be regarded as philosophically important only if they point towards an indeterminacy in the theory of meaning and he thinks that it does not do so. According to Hookway[31], Evans relies upon two claims in criticising Quine's arguments. The first, which we have already mentioned, is that constructing a theory of meaning is a more deeper and fundamental enquiry, and that translation manual should be answerable to the kind of facts uncovered by theories of meaning. Secondly, in constructing a theory of meaning we should choose theories that are 'natural' on the grounds that they provide better explanation of verbal behaviour. And the theory which provides a better explanation is true as the explanatory power is the indication of truth.

What for Evans is a natural theory of meaning? - In the first place, being a theory of meaning, it points towards a system of dispositions which provides psychological explanation of linguistic behaviour. A natural theory hypothesises a single dispositional state underlying all the uses of a particular term while the more ad hoc theory hypothesises varied dispositional states underlying all the uses of the terms. Therefore, if that is correct, we can

choose between the two theories by noting which provides the best explanation of the subject's linguistic behaviour and which fits best into all other things we know about his psychology.[32]

The reason why Quine's argument does not follow this line may be that he does not think that a translation manual or a theory of meaning should give a satisfactory explanation of the speaker's verbal behaviour. It is sufficient that it describes their verbal dispositions. But, if a translation manual leads us to regard that 'gavagai' refers to undetached rabbit parts and not to rabbits, then we have to say that they are perceptually sensitive to undetached rabbit parts and not to rabbits, they want an undetached rabbit part rather than rabbit for a pet, and ascribe to the agent a whole lot of other very curious psychology. In choosing a translation manual we should be guided by a network of considerations - our understanding of human perceptual capacities, the nature of human desire, psychology of reason and deliberation as well as sociological and anthropological information. Quine seems to ignore them altogether.

The reason why Quine does not accept Evan's point that cognitive psychology and semantic theory have explanatory autonomy can be traced back to his adherence to physicalism. Adherence to physicalism underlies both the argument from above as well as the argument from below. There are several strands to Quine's physicalism. Physical facts are all the facts and all explanations are physical explanations. Physics is the paradigm of scientific inquiry. Science other than physics does not provide autonomous explanation, or studies distinctive feature of reality. Being a realist about physical theory Quine accepts that there are physical facts of the matter about which physical statements are true. Quine, in this respect is very close to the traditional behaviourists. As Hookway remarks[33], Quine's position can be viewed as a combination of two claims : 1. the metaphysical assumption of the traditional behaviourism is unassailable, and 2. the behaviouristic outlook cannot do justice to the kind of discourse about meaning and the mind which are familiar from ordinary language and the work of cognitive psychologists. So cognitive psychology should be banished and ordinary language should be replaced by a suitable regimented form of discourse for purposes of scientific

understanding.

One cannot but feel acute uneasiness to this Quinean position. It seems that Quine has a very narrow vision of philosophy. Quine may have been aware of this fact and has made initial attempts to explain our ordinary practices of using concepts like belief or necessity. But he is always hampered by his working within the physicalist framework. What he misses may be constitutive of a significant part of human experience. Why should we conclude from the fact that all changes involve physical changes that physical facts exhaust all the facts?

If, again, as the argument from above requires, under-determination of physical theory is compatible with realism about physical theory, why can't we say that under-determination of translation theory is compatible with realism about them ? Why can't we say that there is, a fact of the matter about which either of a pair of rival translation schemes is correct? If we say that the intrusion of pragmatic considerations in deciding between two rival translation schemes is sufficient for the conclusion that there is, in general, no fact of the matter, why isn't the parallel intrusion of pragmatic considerations in deciding between two rival physical theories enough to ensure that there is no fact of the matter in this case either? Quine's answer may be that though a translation theory is parallel, it is additional. But the fact remains that it is parallel. The logical possibility of alternative interpretations of meaning cannot possibly feature in an attack on the concept of meaning in the way Quine thinks it does. As Blackburn points out.

> ... if the logical possibility of choice about meaning in the face of evidence were taken to discredit that concept, then the logical possibility of choice about almost anything in the face of evidence would discredit virtually all concepts. In particular there would be an exact parallelism with the concepts of physical science, where most philosophers, but especially Quine, believes that there is no logically conclusive evidence for the truth of theories containing them.[34]

Quine might say that we do not need semantic concepts as much as we need scientific concepts. But this kind of pragmatism itself seems to be too narrow.

The task of a correct physical theory is to seek a correct description of what are taken to be facts behind the appearance of things. In a similar way, one can say that a correct theory of translation wants to describe and explain facts about linguistic behaviour. And a linguistic behaviour involves much more than what Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation takes it to involve. To quote Blackburn once again,

> It is difficult to imagine a more valuable intellectual goal than removal of the fear that there is no fact of the matter which explains and interprets the human signs which are such an important component of everyone's experience.[35]

It is the meaning facts or the propositions which help us in understanding linguistic as well as psychological practises of human beings. The impoverished Quinean notion of physicalist/behaviourist philosophy seems to fail in this respect.

NOTES

In writing this paper I was immensely benefited from the discussions I had with Professor Bob Hale and Professor Crispin Wright. This has been revised during the first three months of my ICPR fellowship.

1. See Simion Blackburn (1975), The Identity of Proposition, in his (ed) *Meaning, Reference and Necessity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
2. W.V. Quine (1970a) *Philosophy of Logic*, Prentic-Hall, Englewood cliffs, NJ,p.3
3. W.V. Quine (1960), *Word and Object*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., p.208
4. W.V. Quine (1969), *Ontological Relativity and other Essays*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp.26-7.
5. *Ibid, p.28*
6. *Ibid.p.27*
7. A. translation manual being a function which maps expressions of one language onto expressions of another language, is said to be adequate, if the sentences which are the arguments and values of that function are semantically equivalent.

8. See C. Hookway (1988), *Quine : Language, Experience and Reality,* Polity Press, Cambridge, pp.128-9.

9. *Ibid,* p.128

10. The thesis does not say that there may be a uniquely correct translation, but that we fail to get at it because our evidence is inadequate to settle the matter. Quine's scepticism runs deeper than this - what he says is that there is no such fact of the matter - whether adequate or inadequate - to settle the issue.

11. W.V. Quine (1970b), On the Reasons for Indeterminacy of Translation, *The Journal of Philosophy*, p.183

12. This argument is encapsulated in the under-determination of physical theory.

13. Quine (1970b), p.179

14. A note about stimulus meaning and observation sentences. Stimulus meaning (either affirmative or negative) of a sentence S for a given speaker is the class of stimulations which would prompt assent to or dissent from S. Two sentences for a given speaker are stimulus synonymous when they are assented to in just the same circumstances for a given speaker. Observation sentences are a subset of the set of occasion sentences. An occasion sentence (like, it is snowing), as opposed to standing sentence (like, Snow is white, or 2+2 =4), is assented to in some occasion and not in others. An occasion sentence is an observation sentence if all speakers assent to it in response to the same stimulation. Quine's suggestion is that the stimulus meaning of an observation sentence does full justice to its meaning. (Quine (1960), p...31-4)

15. Now a note on analytical hypothesis. Unlike observation sentences, most of a person's utterances cannot be correlated with publicly observable situations. But in case of radical translation, where no translation is available the translator needs to go beyond observation sentences. The strategy he follows is to dissect the unconstrued sentences into smaller parts and then hypothetically correlate them to words and phrases of his native tongue. These are called analytical hypotheses. By means of these analytical hypotheses we construe analogies between those sentences that have been successfully translated and

those which have not. As Quine says (See Quine (1960), p.70), the method of analytical hypotheses is a way of catapulting oneself into jungle language by the momentum of the home language. It is a way of grafting exotic shoots onto the old familiar bush ... In this subtle way the linguist superimposes his home language and conceptual scheme upon the foreign language in almost every act of translation, and it is here that translational indeterminacy becomes philosophically interesting.

16. Quine (1970 b). p.178

17. *Ibid*, P. 179. A small note on the last two lines in this quotation may be made here. It seems to be one thing to say that two different theories might be empirically equivalent and another thing to say that two empirically equivalent theories might be logically incompatible. Quine seems to be making a further point here.

18. Quine (1970b), p.180

19. When a theory is said to have empirical slack it is methodologically underdetermined by observation, that is observation by itself is insufficient for fixing, in any unique way, the theorietical sentences of a theory.

20. Quine (1970b), p.180

21. *Ibid p. 180*-1

22. R.F. Gibson (1982), *The Philosophy of W.V. Quine*, The University of Florida Press, Tampa, Florida, p.93

23. Quine (1970 b) p.182

24. *Ibid, p.72*

25. See Hookway (1988), pp.139 -45

26. Quine has no hesitation in using concepts which are properly extensional in logic and philosophy of language.

27. Scientific study of mind and language, for Quine, is purely extensional as well, remaining faithful to the Watsonian behaviourist approach to mind.

28. Hookway (1988), p.142
29. *Ibid*
30. *Ibid*, p.153
31. *Ibid*
32. *Ibid*, p.157
33. *Ibid*, p.160
34. Blackburn (1975), p.198
35. *Ibid, p.197*